What is the Significance of the 1989 Demonstrations in China?

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I wish to alter our question, slightly, to "What is the significance of the crackdown that ended the demonstrations?" I do this because it is the crackdown more than the demonstrations themselves that has made a profound difference in shaping the China that we see today.

First we must understand that the 1989 demonstrations sprang from discontent that was much deeper and broader in Chinese society than the feelings of some students at elite universities who had become enamored of Western political ideals. There were, that spring, large demonstrations in more than 30 Chinese cities; these protests were usually led by students, but workers and many kinds of other citizens supported them broadly. The major complaints were about corruption, special privileges for the political elite, and the urban "work unit" system that was restricting personal freedoms and was seen as holding China back. The 1989 movement was a *nationalist* movement in an important sense. And it was animated much more by revulsion against Chinese state socialism than by attraction to foreign ideas.

For the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the challenge of the 1989 upsurge was how to handle it (stifle it, adjust to it, accommodate it—or a combination) while continuing to serve the Party's top priority, which was, and still is, monopoly political power. The Party offered the Chinese people a new bargain in the 1990s: make money, in almost any way you can, and we will also allow you more personal freedoms in your daily lives; but you may not challenge CCP power in public and may not form organizations—political, religious, or otherwise--that the CCP does not monitor and (if it chooses) control. In short: money, *yes*; politics *no*.

The Chinese people have accepted this bargain and it is hard to blame them for doing so. Freedom in one sphere of life, after all, is better than freedom in no sphere. People pursued what they could, worked hard, and have greatly improved their material lives. At the same time the consequences of rejecting the bargain were set out in unmistakable terms, beginning with the 1989 massacre itself. Why did the regime use tanks and machine guns in 1989, instead of tear gas, water hoses, or (as it did in breaking up the April 5, 1976 Tiananmen protests) billy clubs? The use of overwhelming force with bloody consequences served to put an exclamation point on the regime's message of "no more politics!". In the ensuing months, policies of mandatory military service for students, "patriotic education" in textbooks and schools, and thoughtwork in the media aimed at consolidating the new formula.

The regime was very successful in the 1990s in turning the latent nationalism of the 1989 movement into an explicit version of nationalism that served CCP interests. The message that "to be a patriot is to support the Party" was constantly stressed in the media, in textbooks, in bids for the Olympic Games (as well as the eventual staging of the Games), and in conflicts, real and imagined, with "foreign forces" such as Japan, the U.S., and the Dalai Lama. By the end of the 1990s, money-making and nationalism were the dominant public values in Chinese society, and both were strong.

But this left the society with a badly distorted value system. It is a deeply-rooted assumption in Chinese culture—and "Confucian" cultures generally—that a society needs values that are both *ethical* and *public.* In the mid-1990s Chinese intellectuals began to speak of a "values vacuum" because they found this kind of public morality to be missing. In recent years

Chinese popular fiction has made clear a strong appetite among the public for characters who—as if in contradiction to the society that readers live in—are honest, sincere, decent, and ready to do what is right even if it is not in their material self-interest. During the same years China has seen revivals of religion—Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Taoism, and others—but the project of letting religions lead the way to shared public values has been frustrated by CCP repression, which happens any time a religious organization is seen to be wandering outside Party control. Chinese people continue today with their frustrating search for public ethical values, and personal insecurity remains a problem among people at many levels of society. These problems must be viewed as important long-term consequences of the 1989 repression.

The generation of people now in their teens and twenties comprise an important special case. This generation has grown up with the "money, yes; politics, no" bargain, and many have internalized the formula so well that it seems to them simply odd—counterintuitive—to work for political ideals when one could be pursuing self-interest instead. (The focus on self in this generation is reinforced by the fact that almost all of them, at least in the cities, have grown up without siblings.) For them, allegiance to the Party is built on self-interest. It would be a mistake to view them as deeply committed to Party principles; they could veer in other directions in the future.

Few among the young have very clear ideas about what happened in 1989 or much desire to dig deeply into the question. Their education has taught them that the events were only an "incident" caused by troublemakers and that "the Chinese people" long ago reached a "correct historical verdict" and have moved on. In this generation, the Party policy of distorting the record and inducing amnesia has largely succeeded.

But among the middle and older generations, much remembering continues. The families of victims of course remember, and people like Ding Zilin, head of the Tiananmen Mothers group, have done courageous work to help these families "come out" with their painful memories. Many others—not themselves victims but direct or indirect witnesses—also continue to remember, if only privately. The June Fourth massacre remains a festering sore in Chinese political culture.

Among those who certainly do remember are the top leaders themselves. Why else would early June be declared a nationwide "sensitive period" year after year? Why else would the regime dispatch a bevy of plainclothes police, during these sensitive periods, to accompany the 72-year-old Ding Zilin as she goes out to the market to buy vegetables? To "protect her", as they put it? Clearly not. The purpose is to protect themselves, the masters of the regime, from the power of the ideas that this elderly woman symbolizes. It is hard to imagine a clearer demonstration that memories of 1989 are alive in the minds of the men on top.

For the past twenty years critics of the 1989 repression have been calling on the regime to "reverse the verdict" on it. This would mean, in essence, declaring that the Tiananmen demonstrations were a "patriotic" movement—not, as in the official formulation that has held for twenty years, "anti-Party and anti-socialist". It would also entail an admission that the military repression was a "mistake." So far the Party leaders have rebuffed demands for "verdict reversal", and it is likely for the foreseeable future that they will continue to rebuff them. For critics of the repression, the important issues are that truth should be acknowledged and justice should be done. Not so for the regime leaders. For them, the key question (always their key question) is whether "reversing the verdict" would add to or detract from the Party's grip on power. On the one hand, to admit to the truth and make amends with aggrieved parts of the

populace would reap a certain harvest in popular support; on the other hand, it would entail admission that the regime had made a serious “mistake,” and this admission might endanger the claim to monopoly power. The top leaders are aware, too, that certain ones of their own number could use the “mistake” at Tiananmen as a political weapon to discredit rivals, and the possibility remains that this kind of opportunism might appear some day. But there is no current sign of it, and for now a verdict-reversal appears highly unlikely. Beneath the surface, though, the issue continues to fester and shows little sign of healing.